

Lonely Woman (1977)

By Takako Takahashi (高橋 たか子) (Japan)

Translated from the Japanese by Maryellen Toman Mori

In the midst of her dream, Sakiko was dimly conscious of letting out a long moan. The moan was emerging, like something being squeezed out, from some obscure place deep inside her body. Just before reaching her mouth it stopped short, and to her irritation, it wouldn't come out. The moan welled up again and again at regular intervals. Although it didn't escape her lips, it produced an audible sound. That sound grew louder and louder until the mounting pressure in her chest finally woke Sakiko up.

Fire engines seemed to be approaching, their sirens wailing over and over.

As she listened to that sound, which she couldn't yet distinguish from her moan, Sakiko turned face up in bed and peered through the darkness. The terrain around here was sinuous. Often it would sound as if a fire engine was approaching, but suddenly the wail of its siren would swerve off and subside. The area was tightly hemmed in by rings of small mountains, so a siren emitted by a distant vehicle would reverberate among the mountains and sometimes sound deceptively close by.

The first fire engine's siren ceased. Sakiko, whose entire attention had been focused on that sound, guessed that the vehicle had stopped on the other side of the mountain. This house, where she was renting a second-story room, stood on a bluff, and the road in front of it circled halfway around the mountain. She imagined the fire engine on the other side, partly because of a strange building over there that sometimes caught her attention when she passed it while out on a walk. The building, which resembled a slightly outdated company dormitory, was deserted and looked rather incongruous. Its tin roof was so green that one might mistake the color for verdigris. For some reason, it was that building which Sakiko now pictured as being wreathed in flames.

Suddenly she heard loud popping noises, like the sound of bamboo canes bursting open. She instantly leaped out of bed,



Takako Takahashi
1932-2013

thinking it was a mountain fire. Rain hadn't fallen for fifty-one days straight, and the winter mountains were completely dried out.

When she opened the wooden shutters, her entire field of vision was engulfed in bright crimson flames that were shooting up and evaporating with a thunderous roar. It wasn't a mountain fire. The house next door was on fire. Those mysterious popping noises continued without abating. At first she'd thought it was the sound of the parched trees on the mountains splitting apart as they

burned. But when she stuck her head out of the second-floor window and looked down on the road, she realized that the noises were coming from a hose being unreeled from a fire engine that was parked there. "What should I do?" she murmured. The landlord and landlady were away for two weeks. If the fire spread here from the neighbor's home, Sakiko would be partly responsible. But the words "What should I do?" had merely sprung to her lips automatically at the sight of the fire, and Sakiko didn't budge from the spot. The things in this rented room were her only worldly possessions, but she felt no impulse to try to protect

them. She just stood by the window, entranced by the sight of the encroaching flames.

Since there was no breeze, the pillar of fire rose straight toward the sky. Just as it was turning into a sheet of flame, it suddenly shattered into countless fine sparks that continued to shoot upward. The entire spectacle seemed to be making a roaring sound, yet at the same time to be a silent drama of color and shapes. Sakiko gazed at the dire scene before her eyes with a sense of urgency, but that sense was at odds with her feeling of being rooted to the spot. The brilliant hue of the pillar of fire gradually suffused the entire sky, creating a crimson panorama. Against that backdrop the silhouette of the house next door slowly emerged. *Why, no! It's not the house next door that's on fire!* When this dawned on Sakiko, she again thrust her head out the window.

A steady stream of people was filing down the street through the darkness, which had turned into a reddish-black haze. Why, at this hour of night? They weren't walking in groups, but one by one. Perhaps that was why each person looked strangely forlorn, strangely expressionless, as he emerged from the pitch-darkness into the light cast by the fire, was illuminated for a moment, then vanished, as if plunging into the darkness. Even after she realized



that these people were on their way to gape at the fire, Sakiko couldn't shake off the eerie feeling aroused in her by the sight of people walking singly, one after another. Perhaps each person who'd rushed out of his home to gawk at the fire had dashed out alone without thinking,

and was now bewildered to find himself walking alone in the middle of the night.

If the fire wasn't next door, then where was it? On the other side of Sakiko's neighbor's house was an elementary school. But why should there be a fire late at night at a deserted elementary school? After assuring herself that there was no wind and also that plenty of fire engines had assembled, Sakiko snuggled down in her bed again, immediately forgot about the fire and everything else, and fell into a sound sleep. Then, at the threshold of her consciousness, again she could hear sirens wailing and merging with her moan. Finally, the whole blend of sensations swerved up diagonally through her dream and subsided.

"My goodness, it was dreadful, wasn't it? I was a nervous wreck wondering what would happen. I was the first one to notice it. Did you realize that it was I who was going around knocking on the gates of your house and the ones across the street, crying 'Fire! Fire!'"

The moment she saw Sakiko, the old woman who lived alone next door barraged her. She was obviously worked up; her ordinarily shrill voice sounded all the shriller to Sakiko.

"What's this crowd doing here?" Sakiko asked, stopping just outside her gate. Unlike the people she'd seen last night, drifting through the darkness like ghosts, today there were people casually standing around from here all the way up the road, as far as she could see. At this hour, just past seven o'clock, when Sakiko always passed through her gate on her way to work, she was used to seeing only office workers striding along through the crisp morning air, with resolute looks on their faces.

"Can you imagine how I felt? There was a fire roaring right in front of my house! Oh, of course, my yard is big. And there wasn't a breeze, either. But the problem is the mountains. If the fire were to spread to the mountains, my house, naturally, and yours too, and everything around here would be burned to ashes, don't you see?" The old woman's voice rose melodramatically on the final syllable.

"Why are all these people standing around here?" Sakiko asked again. The old woman had ignored her question and just kept venting her own feelings. If it were only the people in their neighborhood, it would be understandable. But many people whom Sakiko had never seen before were clustered together and talking, as if conferring with each other.

"Oh yes, indeed they are. The elementary school gymnasium burned to the ground. The parents must be worried to death," said the old woman, putting her own slant on the matter. Then she shrieked, "Oh, Missus!" and made a beeline for the housewife standing diagonally across from them. Two other housewives whom Sakiko recognized were standing with that woman.

"In fifty-one days it hasn't rained a drop, you know. It was like throwing a lit match into a pile of firewood. In no time at all it burned to the ground."

"My dear, today is the *fifty-second* day," crowed the old woman's voice.

"What in the world is going on? Nothing but fine weather day after day."

"Apparently it's going to continue for some time. I hear there's no sign of rain for the rest of the month,"

"They say just throwing a lit cigarette into the mountains would make them go up in flames. Well, thank heavens that sparks didn't fly last night."

"Dear, do you remember the mountain fire we had five years ago?" The old woman's eyes widened behind her silver-rimmed glasses.

"That must have been before we moved here."

"Goodness, it was dreadful. Look-- that mountain over there-- do you see? There's not a single tree in sight, is there. Because at that time they were all destroyed. Do you know that lone farm-

house on the edge of the river? Well, they tore down the barn over there and set it on fire. A sheet of newspaper that was on fire floated off, and even though it's awfully far away, the scrap was caught up by the wind and sailed straight off and landed on top of that mountain. It was evening. That night



the mountain turned bright red and kept right on burning. I don't know how many fire engines came. Sirens were blaring from all directions. What with the fire and the sirens, I was dashing in and out, in and out. Naturally, I didn't sleep a wink all night. After all, I'm a woman living alone, you know. Not that there was any danger that the fire would spread all the way to my house. But I'm a woman living alone, after all. Oh, that's right. That time too-- I remember now-- I went from house to house spreading the word. I cried, 'Fire! Fire!'"

The old woman mimed, with exaggerated gestures, how she had knocked on each and every gate. Her shrill voice contrasted oddly with the elegant effect created by her lovely white hair and impeccable kimono.

"How did yesterday's fire start?"

"It was because it hasn't rained for fifty-two days. When the air gets so dry that even your throat is parched, it's no wonder if suddenly something just bursts into flame."

"What a strange thing to say!"¹

¹ The use of exclamation points here and elsewhere in the translation should not always be interpreted as connoting shouting or excitement (as would normally be the case in English). In Japanese an emphatic, declarative statement is conveyed by an extra grammatical particle after the verb. In written English, this same sort of information is almost always implied and understood as emphatic by context (rather than by any grammatical feature or punctuation mark). For example, the use of the exclamation mark in "Fire!" in the story conforms to how a native English speaker would normally use the punctuation mark, whereas its usage in "What a strange thing to say!" suggests certainty and emphasis, rather than heightened emotion or volume in expressing the thought. The translator could have replaced the exclamation point with a period and let context imply the speaker's tone, but she is choosing to preserve grammatical information that does not have an exact English correspondence because the author's intent here is quite explicit in the original Japanese. You will have to use context to decide how the exclamation mark is being used on a case-by-case basis as you work your way through the story. The

"If it doesn't rain for the rest of the month, there'll be tongues of fire spurting from everyone's mouth, mark my words.² Anyway, I'm parched right down to my innards."

"If it doesn't rain for another ten days, it will be the first time in the history of the weather station, they say."

"My intuition tells me that there's no chance of the drought ending in ten days. This fine weather will last another twenty or thirty days. You wait and see. Bad luck brings more bad luck. Rain, indeed!"

Intrigued by the old woman's words, Sakiko stood listening for a while, then quickly walked off.

As she passed along her next-door neighbor's hedge, heading toward the elementary school, she saw groups of people who looked like parents standing in clusters. The buzzing of their voices filled the road. No rain in fifty-two days... fine weather continuing without even a cloudy day... dried-out houses and mountains... Those same phrases, repeated over and over, kept grazing Sakiko's ears.



an early 60s designed Japanese elementary school
(糸魚小学校 in Hokkaido)

The school gymnasium, reduced to blackened pillars, ridges, and beams, stood desolately near the roadside on the school grounds. White vapor was rising into the cold air from the charred, water-drenched pieces of wood. Firemen were still tramping around the muddy school grounds in galoshes.

important thing, though, is when it is used in dialog, do not assume that people are shouting at one another.

² Acts 2:1-4:

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they [the apostles] were all together in one place. ² And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Much of Takahashi's works contain Christian allusions and symbolism (often used, as here, in very idiosyncratic ways). Takahashi converted to Roman Catholicism in 1975 and spent a good portion of her later years as a Carmelite nun.

Sakiko walked toward the gymnasium, mesmerized by the sight of the building that had undergone such a transformation in a single night. She'd grown used to seeing it nearly every day, on her way to and from work and when she was out for a walk. It was astonishing that in a mere hour it had been utterly demolished like this. If someone had happened to be present, he would surely have become a lump of charcoal no different from the charcoal into which the building had turned. The morning sky, visible through the black ruins, augured clear, brilliant blue skies for later that day.

The mountains behind the elementary school seemed to move along with Sakiko as she walked. The branches of the elm, oak, and cherry trees, now bare of leaves, looked as dry as if they were stage scenery. The bases of the tall grasses were so dry that they seemed to be coated with white powder. If there'd been a wind last night, what would have happened? Sakiko could almost hear the old woman next door crying, "Mountain fire! Mountain fire!" her shrill voice echoing through the cruel blue sky.

Slowly, dragging her body like a piece of heavy luggage, Sakiko trudged home that night along the dark road. Since graduating from university she'd been working at a company for six years. Her interest in her job had gradually ebbed, like an evening tide, until she felt as if she'd suddenly found herself standing alone on a deserted beach at dusk. The phrase "I'm so bored" sometimes slipped from her mouth in a voice that was as listless as a yawn.³ Suddenly she recalled the long moan that had welled up again and again from deep within her body during her dream the night before. The moan hadn't sounded as if it could be coming from her, but rather as if some dark beast were emitting it. But when she awoke, in the daylight there was no beast in sight. There was only herself, a person who became bored with whatever she did.

She was walking home along the dark road with the collar of her coat turned up. As she crossed a stone bridge, she caught the scent of stagnant water rising from the darkness beneath her. The riverbed was deeply hollowed out, and the slope leading to it was steep. Ordinarily she could hear the sound of rushing water here. But since it hadn't rained, there was just a hint of moisture in

³ Compared to men, female enrollment in Japanese universities was modest in the 1960s and 1970s, and female students were steered away from high prestige disciplines or careers. The cultural assumption was that educated women would work in menial or dead-end jobs until they married and left the workforce to raise children (Bullock 17). In this context, Sakiko's boredom with her job is probably closer to an objective fact rather than a subjective feeling, as it would be very unusual during this time for women to be doing any kind of work that allowed them any kind of authority, autonomy, or chance for advancement (precisely the sorts of things that correlate with higher job satisfaction).

the odor coming from the rotten leaves lying on the riverbed. Sakiko walked slowly along the winding road that ran past the school grounds. It was almost nine o'clock, so the road was nearly deserted. There was just the sound of her high heels, clicking in a steady rhythm on the pavement. The only structure in sight was the charred skeleton of the gymnasium, which emanated a strange,



unearthly air. There was a breeze tonight. A peculiar tension seemed to linger in the ruins at the desolate site of the fire. Was it because Sakiko was imagining the vivid spectacle of the fire superimposed on the scene before her eyes? A foul odor, produced by the various objects that had

burned together, was also still faintly wafting around.

After she'd walked a bit farther, she looked back and viewed the scene from the opposite angle. The charred framework resembled a skull with its mouth agape. She walked along the long hedge in front of her next-door neighbor's house. Up ahead, where the hedge ended, the cinder block fence of the home where she rented a room seemed to be floating, as it glowed faintly in the darkness.

Sakiko sensed someone behind her and turned around. The silhouette of a man was approaching. His footsteps sounded as if he were following her. That was probably because he was wearing canvas shoes. Even so, she couldn't help but feel that the man was walking directly toward her. He wore a jacket, and perhaps because he was warmly dressed, his upper body looked terribly puffed up. The man came straight at her, both hands shoved into his pockets.

"I'm from the police." The man spoke in a low voice, as if to ensure the privacy of their conversation. His breath turned white in the cold air.

"Miss Namioka?" In complete contrast to his tone of voice, which suggested concern for her privacy, he stood so close to her that their noses were practically touching.

"No, I'm renting a room in the Namiokas' house." Sakiko looked the man over as she spoke. Nothing identified him as a police officer.

"May I come in? It's cold for you out here, isn't it? It's windy tonight." The man said this after glancing at Sakiko, who was clenching her collar with both hands and standing with her legs pressed together.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a police investigator."

"But what do you want?"

"That's what I'm about to tell you. Earlier today I went around to every house in your neighborhood, but you weren't home, so I've come back at this hour."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Not only that; I've been observing you." As if to emphasize his point, the man looked back at the road that ran toward the elementary school. The night sky was a cold, cloudless expanse. The only difference between day and night was that one sky was blue and the other starry. Day and night, not a cloud nor any haze marred the sky; the fair weather went on endlessly. When this occurred to Sakiko, the sky started looking eerily like a faceless monster.

"Is something wrong?" Sakiko asked, as she went alone through the iron gate.

"There's been an arson." The man's tone of voice became sterner.

"Then I have nothing to tell you," said Sakiko, and she inserted her key into the lock of the gate.

"Did you notice anyone suspicious? Last night, I mean?" The man placed his hand on the gate.

"Are you really from the police?" Sakiko was shivering from the cold as she stood facing the man over the low iron gate.

"There've been two other fires that were started by the same method. All of them were at elementary schools. In every case, oil was used."

The man's round face and stocky body were fully illuminated by the lamp at the garden gate.



The oil used to start the fires is for a **オイルヒーター**, a space heater that looks similar to a radiator. Most Japanese homes do not have central heat.

"Who set them?" asked Sakiko, feeling herself becoming strangely excited.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be standing here at this time of night."

"No, I mean, was it a man or a woman?" Sakiko asked. She had a flash of self-revelation.

"That's a strange thing to say. If I don't know who did it, how could I know whether it was a man or a woman?"

"I think it was a woman."

"Oh, do you now! And why is that?"

"It's just a hunch."

"But you speak with such conviction. So you did see someone suspicious last night." The man removed a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it. In the freezing night air the red tip of the cigarette looked hard and sharp.

"I'm cold. I catch colds easily. I'll have to excuse myself now." Sakiko took five or six steps over the flagstone path and stopped at the front door of the house.

"Wait right there," the man said, his tone unexpectedly firm.

"Do you have more to ask? If it's about the arson incident, I don't know a thing." Sakiko was fishing her keys out of her handbag as she spoke.

"I'd like to ask a few more questions. Can I step inside?"

"Please come back tomorrow. It's Saturday, so I'm off work."

"No, this can't wait. There might be a fire again tonight." The man spoke quickly. He pulled the front zipper of his jacket down halfway, and from his inside pocket he pulled out something like a notepad.

"Why would there be a fire tonight?" asked Sakiko, her interest aroused. As she spoke, her fingertips examined the ring of keys that she'd removed for the shape of tile key to the front door.

"If the arsonist is the same guy as before, he always sets two fires at the same school."

"You keep saying that. Believe me, it's a woman." Sakiko unlocked the door with her key and began to go inside.

"If you have any idea, please don't hesitate to speak up. I can assure you that it won't cause any trouble for you." The man leaned forward over the gate.

"It's past nine o'clock. Besides, I don't even know if you're a police officer or not," said Sakiko as she began closing the door.

"Look at this, It's a police identification badge," the man appealed. Sakiko caught a split-second glimpse of the man's white breath and the pad that he was holding out, just before the door closed.

* * *

On her days off, Sakiko slept late. The landlord and landlady were out of town, so she was alone in the large house, and it was silent all morning. That silence blended with the cold and numbed her to the bone. The house stood right beside a mountain, so its chilliness was more penetrating than that of most homes.

She'd felt almost no interest in the fire, except as a spectacle of crimson flames raging in the darkness. But because of her conversation last night with that man who was apparently a police investigator, she had the strange feeling that the fire had insinuated its way into her consciousness. She washed her face, then immediately went out and stood in front of the gate. Instinctively, she began heading toward the elementary school. As she walked along the hedge in front of her next-door neighbors home, she noted that today, unlike the previous morning, there was no crowd. Only the white, slightly winding pavement stretched on ahead of her. The house next door was much larger than the one where she was renting a room. The purely Japanese-style edifice where the old woman lived alone stood there with a dignified air. Sakiko conjured up a hazy image of the woman. She was always carefully dressed in traditional attire. But whenever Sakiko heard that shrill, nervous voice emitting its steady stream of babble, she sensed turbulent emotions, which the old woman could scarcely contain, seething beneath her refined exterior. Sometimes at night, from her second-floor room, Sakiko would gaze next door, where lights were still on. The lights were on, but she never heard human voices. Because the old woman lived alone.⁴ And yet Sakiko always imagined the old woman sitting in the middle of her



an older woman in traditional attire; even in the 1970s, wearing a kimono every day would have been perceived as very old-fashioned

⁴ That the old woman lives alone is more significant than it seems. Takahashi is at pains to stress how traditional the old woman is in that she lives in a Japanese-style home (with multi-purpose rooms, portable furniture, and removable, sliding partition walls) and dresses in a traditional manner (a kimono). Yet the traditional pattern before the modern-era was for Japanese families to live in multi-generational homes. As late as the 1960s, roughly a third of all Japanese families contained three generations, and until the defeat in World War II changed social patterns, the expectation was that the eldest son was responsible for the care of his parents as they aged (Tanaka 130). In other words, Takahashi is

large house late at night, chattering gaily in her shrill voice, and the house teeming with that inaudible chatter.

After passing the house next door, Sakiko heard clamor coming from the direction of the elementary school up ahead. Ordinarily she would leave her home early in the morning and return in the evening, so she hardly ever heard anything. But on Saturday morning, when she was home from work, sometimes noise drifted all the way to her room. Sakiko disliked the din that came from the elementary school, the high-pitched shrieks of the young children scattering in all directions.

The charred gymnasium came into view. Against the background of the blue sky it looked all the blacker, and its insides were gutted. It still had a sinister air about it, probably because Sakiko imagined it wreathed in fierce flames. The racket was coming from the classroom building. The din, which sounded full of irritation and also made the hearer feel irritated, drifted from the entire building. Just then, the spectacle of children trapped in the burning gymnasium, emitting piercing screams, flashed across Sakiko's mind.

Sakiko averted her eyes from that scene and turned right down a road. She came to a house with a long white wooden fence. The old woman who lived next door to her was standing at the back door to that house.

"Because I have sharp ears. Anyway, I'm a woman living alone, after all. In the middle of the night, just the click of a single dry leaf dropping to the ground is enough to wake me up. When I heard that crackling sound of fire, I sat bolt upright. But no one else had realized it yet. Even though there was a pillar of fire blazing up, nobody had come out of his house. I was the first one to rush out, you know, and I went around from door to door knocking and crying, 'Fire! Fire!'"

The old woman was talking to the housewife at the house with the white wooden fence. She was probably saying the same thing to everyone she met.

"Well hello, Miss Namioka! Out for a stroll?" When the old woman noticed Sakiko, her face lit up in a friendly smile. She always addressed Sakiko by her landlord's surname. Sakiko simply bowed politely. If she let herself be detained, she would be subjected to endless chatter.

"Fine weather again today-- isn't it disgusting? This makes the fifty-third day. Mark my word, it's going to last for sixty, even seventy days. It's ridiculous to have so much fine weather."

drawing attention to a breakdown in traditional living arrangements, just as the single, career-woman Sakiko (who lives on her own) draws attention to another way that social norms were changing in Japan.

The old woman faced Sakiko and bowed formally over and over. Sakiko passed, then after she'd gone a bit farther, the friendly voice pursued her. "You haven't heard yet, have you? It was arson! They say the culprit is watching for another chance. Next time it will be the classroom building. And if that happens, there's sure to be a mountain fire."

Sakiko turned in the direction of the lively voice, bowed again, then kept walking.

She had come out to look at the aftermath of the fire without even eating breakfast. She felt as though the old woman's chatter had dissipated her strange obsession with the fire, so she circled around the neighborhood, then headed back to her home.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you last night." A man was standing in front of Sakiko's gate. He looked the same as last night, but indeed, he did seem to be a police officer.

"I just went to have a look at the site of the fire." said Sakiko, laughing slightly.

"You seem to be awfully interested in it?" The investigator kept a perfectly straight face and stared sharply at her.

"Interested?" she rejoined. She pictured the young children burning, packed together in the blazing gymnasium.

"I came again because I sensed that you had some information that could be useful to us." The officer winked.

"Well, step inside, then. But as far as useful information goes, I have nothing to offer." Sakiko invited him in because she was eager to know about the arsonist.

The man sat on the step in the front hall and began smoking a cigarette. He took a puff or two, and then, with the cigarette poised in midair, he fell silent. The back of his bulky jacket bulged up right before Sakiko's eyes. As she faced that back, which seemed to be bottling up thoughts that its owner wanted to express, Sakiko struggled to suppress her curiosity. She felt as if it was about to erupt from her throat like the twittering of a pigeon.

"Well?" said Sakiko, taking the initiative.

"To come to the point, did you see something?" The man ignored her question and directed his own question at her.

"Is that what they call a 'police pad'?" Sakiko looked at the badge holder that the policeman was toying with in the hand that wasn't holding the cigarette.

"I believe you said it was a woman, didn't you?" The investigator, who had been keeping his back to Sakiko, finally turned to look at her. His piercing gaze bore straight into her.

"I did say that. So how in the world did the woman execute the crime?" asked Sakiko, her own direct gaze challenging the officer's.

"We don't know whether or not it's a woman!"

"Didn't you say the person is focusing on elementary schools?"

"Yes; this is the third incident!"

"Why?"

"You'd have to ask the arsonist that one!"

"I know perfectly well."

"You do?"

"Of course."

The investigator stifled a response, turned his back to Sakiko again, and leaned forward. The cigarette between his fingertips continued to burn, and the elongated ash, heavy as feathery snowflakes, dropped to the ground. The man finally noticed, and he tapped the cigarette with his fingertip to make more ash fall off.

Sakiko began laughing.

"What is it?" The investigator looked at her.

"It's a concrete floor, so you don't have to worry. Since it hasn't rained in fifty-three days, all it would take is that cigarette to make this house go up in flames!" Sakiko struggled to contain her mirth.

"This isn't the first year that an elementary school has been the target of arson. It's happened every year for a long time. Schools in general are likely targets, even junior high and high schools," said the man, ignoring Sakiko's snickers.

"Only at night?"

"It's happened during the day, too!"

"Are there fires at elementary schools during the daytime?" Sakiko asked. Again she envisioned countless young children shrieking, roasting to a crisp in that inferno with no exit.

"I said that this is the third incident in the case, didn't I? Assuming that the arsonist is the same person. He sets two fires each time. Did I tell you this?"

"Did the schools burn to the ground?"

"In the initial instance, yes. First he set fire to the gymnasium, then the classroom building. Those two fires destroyed everything!"

"Was the second incident the same?"

"No, those fires were set during the day, and they only amounted to small ones!"

"During the day? That's strange, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"It's risky, isn't it? For the criminal. An elementary school is a place with lots of people. The criminal would be caught, wouldn't she?"

"That's what puzzles me, too. The method was the same-- oil was used-- but even though it was daytime, no one saw anyone suspicious?"

"Oh, now I get it. It's simple." Sakiko became animated.

"Again, you speak with conviction."

Maybe because he was staring hard at her, the man seemed to be squinting.

"But the arsons at night... What in the world drives a person to set fire to a deserted elementary school?"

During this conversation, Sakiko had suddenly grown so excited that her chest ached. She now regretted not having gone to the scene of the fire the night before last. She hadn't witnessed the actual sight of the gymnasium in flames, because the house next door had blocked her view of the building.

"What drives a person? That varies, according to the statistics. These days prices are high, and we're in a recession. People feel frustrated or they suddenly get the urge to vent their feelings... That's usually how it happens." The officer kept a businesslike, expressionless face as he delivered his explanation.



"Setting fire at night to an elementary school would be a perfect solution. Anyway, the blaze would be enormous. Enormous and magnificent." Sakiko spoke as if she were viewing the spectacle through the eyes of the arsonist.

"Even an arsonist has an ethical sense. If he sets fire to an elementary school at night, only the buildings will burn."

"But the second incident was during the day, wasn't it? She set the buildings on fire at a time when they were filled with pupils. Was it the same arsonist as the first time?" Sakiko asked, leaning forward slightly.

"I said before, didn't

I? The method was the same."

The man lit yet another cigarette. Many stamped-out cigarette butts lay on the concrete floor.

"You said the person used oil, didn't you," said Sakiko. She felt as if she could smell that pungent odor, which was neither quite pleasant nor unpleasant.



"Apparently the guy filled an empty pocket flask of whiskey with oil and took it with him. Each time an empty bottle was found at the scene of the fire. When the fire ignited, he slipped away quickly. Like the wind. Anyway, no one noticed him."

"Slipped away quickly? Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"That's not what the woman did."

"The woman'-- you're still convinced that it was a woman, aren't you?"

"At the end of the school day, while the little pupils were still making a commotion, the woman poured the oil and lit the fire, then she slowly walked down the corridor. All around her, pupils were scampering past and teachers were walking by. Everyone had a chance to get a good look at her. But she sauntered along, coolly and slowly, and went out. That's the sort of criminal she is." Sakiko found herself becoming more eloquent than usual.

"Well now; that's remarkable reasoning." Despite his remark, the investigator didn't turn to look at Sakiko. He just kept staring at a single point on the front door.

"Remarkable?"

"No, it's my job, so I'm well aware of that much. But I'm saying that for you, it's remarkable."

"I'm glad if I've been of any help."

Sakiko felt a bit drained. Perhaps it was because she'd gotten so caught up in being the arsonist. She began to feel chilled. The entryway was unheated.

"Will this do? The landlord is away, so I shouldn't let anyone stay here too long," she said, standing up.

"Do you use an oil heater here?" The officer rose too, and spoke without turning around.

"Why?" Sakiko was a bit startled by the question.

"I'm just asking everyone." The man gripped the doorknob.

"Did someone in this neighborhood set the fires?"

As Sakiko pronounced the words "someone in this neighborhood," she suddenly felt agitated. She was one of the people in the neighborhood. She listened intently, as if trying to catch the sound of that agitation. She seemed to hear, welling up from some dark hollow deep within her, that moaning she'd heard in her dream. She stood in a daze, savoring the vague sensation that it was the arsonist who was moaning.

"Is there a bicycle here?" The investigator spoke again, as he finally turned the knob and opened the door.

"I think the landlord has an old bicycle in the shed."

After the man had left, Sakiko stared steadily at the cigarette butts lying on the concrete floor of the entryway. She counted them mechanically-- one, two, three. In contrast, her head reeled feverishly as the imaginary arsonist began stirring within her. Sakiko was starting to feel unbalanced, as if she had lost her moorings.

Around ten o'clock at night Sakiko suddenly decided to go out. She had a hunch that the arsonist was roaming around in the pitch-darkness. Riding a beat-up bicycle, coming out of nowhere, cutting diagonally through the empty night, she was approaching lightly. The pungent odor of oil rose from the inner pocket of her coat. She was circling around and around the neighborhood, mildly intoxicated by that odor, and passionately intoxicated by the crime she was about to commit. If the same person walked past the same place over and over she would arouse suspicion, but if she were riding a bicycle, she wouldn't. Who knows, it might even be someone living in the neighborhood. If she were riding a bicycle, she could also pretend to be someone who'd come from a distance. A woman like her would wear a wool cap, pulled down close to her eyes, and she'd circle around and around, gradually zeroing in on her objective. The investigator had spoken of high prices and economic recession. He'd also mentioned being frustrated and acting on impulse. No, those weren't the reasons, thought Sakiko. Why, then?

She stood up in her room, in order to go out. Just then, inside her, Sakiko felt that kind of woman stand up. Anyway, she would go to the scene of the fire. The arsonist had set fires twice at the same location, so maybe tonight Sakiko would be able to meet her. When she went out into the hall, a cold blast of air struck her cheek. If you stood still outdoors at ten o'clock at night in February, you'd probably be chilled through, she thought.

It occurred to her to cover her head with a large shawl that was meant to be worn with a kimono. She opened her closet and took out one box of clothing after another. When she reached the box on the bottom she dragged it out. She hadn't worn traditional clothing for the past two or three years, so it was stored away.



When she opened the box, she caught a whiff of mothballs. During the time that she wasn't using the garments, she hadn't changed the mothballs, so the clothes gave off a stale, dusty odor. She pulled out the large, imitation-fur shawl. The old newspaper covering it was brittle. On the bottom of the box was another newspaper, neatly folded in a rectangle that exactly matched the shape of the box. She glanced at it.

The headline LONELY WOMAN caught her attention. She noticed that the date on the newspaper was 1966. Evidently it had been placed in the box much earlier than the newspaper that had covered the shawl. Sakiko felt strangely attracted to that headline. As she leaned over the box, she began reading the article. It was in the Home section of the paper.

In the foggy city of London, you sometimes see a certain type of woman. She is no longer young, nor is she old; it's hard to judge her age. Usually she is walking by herself. She leans slightly forward as she trots along, clicking her heels, through that turbid city where the sun never shines because of the fog. She wanders around through the huge metropolis as if she has nothing to do. I could always spot such women, no matter where they were. Because they all bore the same mark. They exuded a peculiar blend of decay and vigor. It wasn't that they shared a certain occupation. It wasn't that they shared a certain social status. It wasn't that they shared a certain physical resemblance. Even when they were laughing, that mark remained visible through their laughter. Even when they were eating, that brand stood out on their hunched backs like a birthmark. I noticed such women in every social class. It wasn't that they constituted a separate class. There is only one phrase to describe such a woman. In the sprawling city of London she is called a "lonely woman."

Sakiko raised her head from the clothes box and murmured in a low voice, "lonely woman."

She stood up, but her desire to wrap the large shawl around her head and go out to meet the arsonist had vanished. Standing stiffly in the middle of the room, she uttered that phrase again. The words were engraved in her mind. Her voice bore no trace of the dampness mentioned in the article; rather, she pronounced the words dryly. "Lonely woman." That was the name of the imaginary female arsonist.

When Sakiko opened the rain shutters, the dazzling afternoon sunlight seemed to pierce her eyes. It was Sunday, so the air

didn't reverberate with the shouts of the elementary school children. The old woman next door was out on her veranda. When Sakiko opened her rain shutters, the sound made her look up in Sakiko's direction. As usual, from early morning she was already meticulously dressed in a kimono, and despite the cold, she stood perfectly erect. She was holding a birdcage in her right hand.

"Well, if this isn't something. This makes one more day. Fifty-four days. Splendid weather, indeed! It's imperial weather, as they say. Miss Namioka, do you know that expression-- 'imperial weather'? It means a clear blue sky without a single cloud, just like today's. Day after day, we're blessed with imperial weather, lucky us! Imagine how dry the mountains must be getting! Can't you almost hear the sound of flames crackling? Just look at that!"

The old woman faced the mountain that lay just beyond her yard, raised her hand that wasn't holding the birdcage, and gestured toward it. Her shrill voice rang out gaily, as if she could hardly wait for the mountains to burst into flames. The second floor where Sakiko was standing and the first-floor veranda where the old woman was were quite far apart, but that voice carried well. It was a voice that resounded through the entire neighborhood, day in and day out. The old woman who lived alone would buttonhole anyone and bombard them with chatter. Layer upon layer of dried-out wild bamboo was growing on the cliff to which the woman had just pointed. It leaned toward her yard.

"Miss Namioka, what do you think of this?" asked the old woman, changing the subject. She lifted up the cage. Inside was a black bird that looked like a baby crow.

Sakiko remained silent. Her voice never had much volume, so if she tried to carry on a conversation with the woman at this distance, she'd probably exhaust herself.



"This is a mynah bird. It's a bird that mimics people's voices. Someone brought it to me this morning." The old woman prattled on to herself.

"It must be quite a job to care for so many of them," Sakiko managed to say.

"What's that?" Apparently the woman couldn't hear Sakiko's fragile voice. She cupped her hand over her ear in an exaggerated gesture, as if straining to hear.⁵

"You're going to keep another one, even though you already have so many?" Sakiko was forced to exert her feeble voice.

"There aren't any others. They all died."

When the old woman said, "They all died," her voice was strangely cheerful. Sakiko couldn't see the expression in her eyes behind her glasses. The side of the old woman's house faced north, and Sakiko sometimes heard the sound of birds twittering on the other side of her home. Apparently the woman kept the birdcages on the south side of the veranda, where it was sunny.

"They died? All of them?" Sakiko was rather bewildered. She cupped both hands around her mouth in trumpet fashion so that her voice would carry, and asked that.

"Indeed they did." Oddly enough, the old woman's whole face lit up in a smile as she replied. Then she hurried off, taking the birdcage with her. Sakiko saw her turn down the corridor that led to the south side of her home.

Sakiko ate breakfast and then she left the house, with no particular plan in mind. On her days off, she usually spent the mornings strolling and shopping. She walked along the hedge in front of the house next door, then along the wire mesh fence of the elementary school. She came upon three housewives in the neighborhood who were standing together and chatting.

"It's irritating, isn't it? To be kept waiting like this."

"Kept waiting?"

"By this fine weather. And by the criminal, too."

"But you say, 'waiting.'"

"Everyone is waiting for it to rain."

"It's the same thing day in and day out."

"Why doesn't it rain?"

"Who knows? Not me. They say the whole world is experiencing abnormal weather."

"Oh, for a drop of rain!"

"Maybe tonight. Anyway, the arsonist always strikes twice in the same place."

"The fair weather and the arsonist seem to be in cahoots."

⁵ Compare to the old woman's words on p. 12:

I have sharp ears. Anyway, I'm a woman living alone, after all. In the middle of the night, just the click of a single dry leaf dropping to the ground is enough to wake me up.

This is not an unintentional inconsistency.

"There's a breeze today. When there's a breeze, I get nervous."

"According to the police officer, first it's the gym, and next he targets the classroom building. With this wind, the fire will spread from the school to the mountains."

"There's no telling whether it will happen during the day or at night."

"On Sunday there's no one around, so today there's a big danger during the day."

Ordinarily, Sakiko didn't have the slightest interest in the housewives' conversations, but today, only because this one concerned the fire, she was drawn in. She just stood listening, without participating. When one of the women bowed to her she felt a bit guilty, and she quickly walked away.

She boarded a bus and got off in front of the train station. In contrast to the residential area, which was tightly girded by the surrounding mountains, here the sky spread out boundlessly. The morning sky was like a tautly stretched, seamless blue expanse. There was no haze, so the blue was unmarred. The crisp cold and that pure blue were well matched. When the sky was this blue day in and day out, she began to sense that behind it a drum was pounding and an invisible festival was in full swing.

"I'm so thirsty," she murmured. In the middle of winter, in this freezing cold, she felt thirsty. Gazing at the changeless, clear sky made her thirsty.

"You came, after all," said a man's voice.

"After all?" said Sakiko, looking up to see that same investigator descending the wide white staircase. She was at the police station.



Kadoma police station in Osaka (1977)

"You're mean. Even though you have information, you hide it and dole it out a bit at a time. You know something about a person who might be the arsonist, don't you?"

The man motioned her to come up. He seemed to be ordering her.

Yes, of course I know, Sakiko said to herself.

She was hesitant, but she wanted to know more about the arsonist, so she began climbing the stairs. This building, which had just been remodeled, was completely white and smooth. The room to which the man escorted her didn't seem like a room for interrogation. A sign that read VISITOR'S ROOM #3 hung at its entrance.

"Please tell me anything you know. As I said the other day, I guarantee that it won't cause trouble for you," said the officer, deliberately softening his facial expression.

Sakiko sat facing him across the table.

"I'd like you to explain in detail from the beginning."

Sakiko looked directly into the man's eyes, aware that her own eyes were gleaming.

The man began smoking a cigarette.

Sakiko initiated the discussion. "Did you say that both the first and the second incidents were at elementary schools? Naturally, the third one will be, too."

"Apparently he came by bicycle. Afterward we learned that just before the fire someone saw a bicycle parked nearby, both the first time and the second time."

"I might have known,"

"What do you mean?"

"The evidence was a bicycle and a pocket flask of whiskey, right?" Sakiko continued. She remembered that there was a bicycle in the shed at her landlord's home. She remembered that in the garbage pile in the backyard were empty pocket flasks of the whiskey that her landlord was always drinking.

"That night... I mean, what was the date?" Sakiko stammered.

"The first incident was the night of January 29, at ten o'clock."

"That night I was at home, but the landlord was away, and no one knew that I was there."

"You say strange things. This is no time for jokes." The officer stared blankly at her.

"The second incident was during the day, wasn't it. By chance, was it Saturday?"

"That's right. It was Saturday, February 3, at eleven in the morning."

"This is bad."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't work on Saturdays. If I'd gone to work, I wouldn't have had time to go to the elementary school. But it was a holiday, so I was at home. No one can vouch that I didn't set foot outside. The landlord and his wife were away for two weeks."

"Your name is Namioka, isn't it?" The officer leaned forward a bit and looked straight at her.

"No, it's Yamakawa. Yamakawa Sakiko."⁶

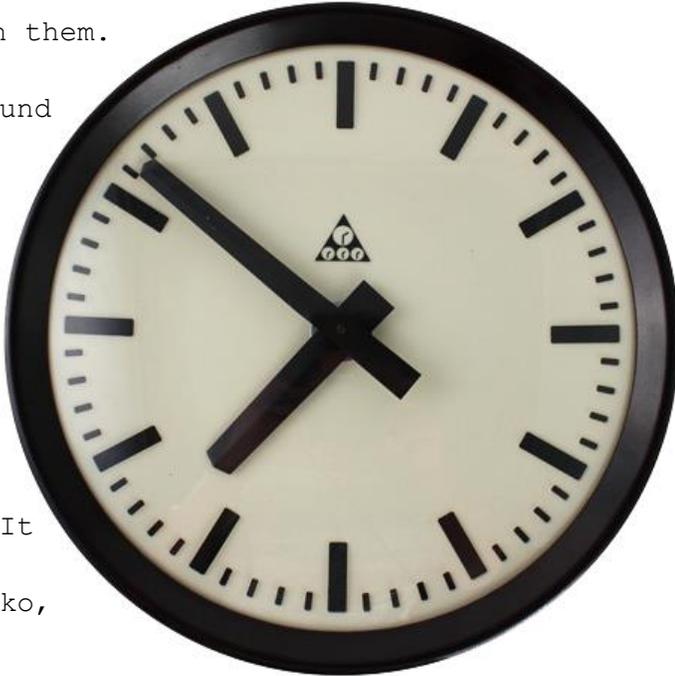
"Do you know Public School Number I in the next town?"

"Yes, because an acquaintance of mine lives near there. It's the wooden building near the river, isn't it?"

"And of course you know R Elementary School on the outskirts of town, don't you?"

"It's odd-- the schools that were set on fire are all ones that I know."

A sudden silence fell between them. The sound of a clock's second hand became audible. Sakiko glanced around the room. There was no clock anywhere. Somewhere in space a clock was ticking off the seconds. Tick-tock, tick-tock, went the methodical tapping, waiting for an explanation. Eventually, everything would surely be revealed. The arsonist's identity would surely be revealed.



"The first incident was at night, the second during the day. It seems that little by little the arsonist became greedy," said Sakiko, in a daze.

"Why do you say that?"

"First she just enjoyed the sight of the flames rising into the darkness. Because that in itself is beautiful."

"But men?" the officer urged.

Sakiko felt a pain in her chest, as if she were about to cough up blood.

"The criminal's interest shifted from a night fire to a day fire. Oh, that's because of the children."

"What about the children?"

Sakiko thought of those youngsters, the elementary school pupils, especially those in the lower grades, with their soft, plump bodies, who could do nothing for themselves but squeal. The arsonist had wanted to burn those little children to death. The little children packed into the classrooms would be roasted alive. Not in an instant, but slowly, slowly, enveloped in flames, enveloped in smoke, shrieking like locusts, they would burn on and on.

"The arsonist is definitely a woman!"

⁶ Yamakawa is Sakiko's surname.

"Why did the person set the fires?" The change in the investigator's tone of voice roused Sakiko slightly from her fantasies.

"Who? That woman?"

"No one has said it was a woman."

I did it. Sakiko tried saying these words to herself. She felt something like red-hot iron pass through her throat and descend to the center of her body.

"May I have a glass of water?" asked Sakiko. She felt as if she'd forgotten where she was.

The policeman got up and went out. An empty reception room; new, smooth walls; a steel table; an imitation leather sofa; and an armchair-- this was all that was here. Sakiko squinted her eyes. Her gaze passed through those things and peered into her interior. Was it her heartbeat that was throbbing so loudly inside her?

The investigator appeared, holding a cup of water in his hand.

"When you have nothing but good weather like this, you get thirsty," said Sakiko, and she drank the water in one gulp. "It's strange, isn't it. Even though it's cold, when the weather is fair day after day, I guess even your throat gets parched." Sakiko rambled on to the man, who stared at her without saying anything.

I did it. Sakiko tried saying the words again to herself. There was nothing to prove that she hadn't done it. There was a bicycle. There were empty whiskey bottles. And there was oil for an oil heater.

Sakiko was gazing down on the city at night. She had ensconced herself in a seat by the window on the second floor of this coffee shop, and she was staring at the entrance to the department store across the street. The entire window was a single pane of glass, and the buses, taxis, and pedestrians passing by on the boulevard were clearly visible. The glass was thick, so no noise from outside was audible.

When she saw the man at the entrance to the department store across the street, Sakiko became excited. They had a date to meet there at 5:30. It was now 5:25. It wasn't completely dark outside yet, and the neon lights looked odd. The man was standing erectly, fully illuminated by the electric light at the department store entrance. He was facing the direction from which he thought Sakiko might appear-- in other words, facing the spot where Sakiko was sitting-- and moving his gaze back and forth. Because the lamp in the ceiling of that entryway was also turned on, Sakiko could see the man's every move as clearly as if he were bathed in a spotlight on stage. His handsome forehead, with its slightly receding hairline, glistened whitely, and his trenchcoat-style overcoat was

attractive on his tall frame. The man glanced at his watch. Simultaneously, Sakiko glanced at her watch. It was 5:38. How many minutes? How many minutes between 10 and 20? How many tens of minutes? How long could this man wait?

Keeping her gaze fastened on the man, Sakiko recalled the conversation that she'd had with him earlier that day.

"Did you read in the newspaper about the smallpox incident?" she had asked the man during their lunch break. They both worked at the same company. According to the morning newspaper, it had been confirmed that a person who had just returned from a trip to India had contracted smallpox there.

A public-service-announcement vehicle from the civic center drove around the chilly, dark neighborhoods, urging residents through a loudspeaker to go to their community center to be vaccinated. Panicky citizens. Lines at the community center lasting until late at night. Mothers carrying babies. Young people leading grannies by the hand. Drove of people who had just thrown on a coat and rushed down. An antiseptic odor permeating the cavernous hall. Here and there groups of people clustered around city workers and nurses wearing white gowns and masks. Young mothers asking, "Are you inoculating even tiny babies like this?" Old men asking, "Do you have enough vaccine?" Everyone looking reassured to hear the serene voices of the nurses saying, "It's all right. Everyone just calm down."

"I'm glad it's not my neighborhood. Probably everyone feels the same way-- I'm so glad it didn't happen near my home," the man had said. He'd been standing in a sunny spot beside the vent on the roof.

"I don't feel that way," Sakiko had said, smiling faintly.

"What? You don't mind if you get smallpox?"

"I wonder why they're all in such a panic?"

She had recalled the photograph in the newspaper. It was a large photo showing mothers with determined expressions on their faces, babies and young children in tow. The women were baring their fleshy shoulders in order to get inoculated as quickly as possible.

"They looked as if they were screaming desperately, 'I don't want to die! I don't want to die!'"

"I guess it's better not to get smallpox than to get it."

"What annoys me is why no one seems to think, 'my life isn't worth a fig.' It's because they don't feel that way that they rush to be inoculated with that resolute look on their faces. I can't stand such mobs."

"Then why do you go on living?" he asked.

"Because I have no reason to die."

"That's a rash thing to say."

"But really, that's the most honest reply-- for me."

"Can I see you tonight?" the man had asked at that point. This was always where her conversations with men led. The more outrageous her remarks, the more avidly men pursued her.



commercial district in Tottori (Chūgoku region) in the late 1970s or early 1980s

Through the window of the coffee shop, Sakiko continued to keep her gaze riveted on the man who stood waiting for her at the entrance of the department store. He glanced at his watch. At the same time, Sakiko glanced at her watch. It was already 5:52. It was 22 minutes past their appointment time. The man seemed to be getting a bit irritated. Over and over, he fretfully plunged his hands into his coat pockets, quickly shifted the direction of his gaze, and so on. Suddenly he spun around and disappeared into the department store. Right past the entrance was the counter for women's accessories. Maybe he thought that Sakiko might be shopping for something there. The man's upper body was cut off from Sakiko's view, but she could see his chocolate brown shoes, gleaming under the light inside the store. They didn't budge for several minutes. Finally the man came out to the entrance again. Two weeks earlier, Sakiko had made this kind of date with a different man. That man had stood at their meeting place for 32 minutes. Did her date for tonight have more perseverance?

Sakiko was assessing that. Actually, Sakiko was inordinately interested in observing men in this way. How much more exciting this sort of encounter was to her than actually meeting a man and conversing with him! She wished that she could go so far as to gaze

at a man through binoculars. Would she play this kind of game with several more men? She knew all too well that before long she would lose interest in it.



"Excuse me, Miss. Would you mind sharing your table?" the waiter said. After finishing her coffee, Sakiko had continued to sit staring out of the window for over thirty minutes. Evidently the waiter was urging her to leave.

Sakiko didn't answer, but a young couple sat down across from her. The girl sat beside the window, so she was facing Sakiko directly. If Sakiko got up and left, the man would probably move to where she was now sitting, so that he and the girl could sit facing each other. Maybe it was Sakiko's imagination, but the pair seemed to be glancing hostilely at her, since she gave no sign of budging.

"Oh, that table is free," said the man, craning his neck.

At a table on the other side of the room, a party of four was standing up and preparing to leave.

"Oh no, someone else took it!" wailed the girl in a high-pitched, cloying voice.

Another party immediately slid into the empty seats. The faces of the young man and woman sitting across from her turned toward Sakiko and glared reprovingly, as if that was her fault.

Sakiko resumed looking at the department store entrance, from which she'd been distracted for a while. Her date was still standing there. The man came out to the sidewalk and looked up at the sky. He seemed to be surveying it for signs of rain, but tonight there was none.

Suddenly Sakiko was seized by a strange notion. She felt as if the reproving stares being directed at her by the young couple who had happened to sit down across from her were actually being directed at her by the man with whom she had a date. That man had taken possession of the eyes of the couple in front of her and was now glowering at Sakiko. And another image was superimposed on that one: the menacing looks that investigator had given her.

The imaginary arson, with its vivid flames and smoke and children's screams, resumed its part-painful, part-pleasurable burning inside her. The fire had been on Thursday night. On Friday evening she'd met with the police officer, and on Saturday and Sunday during the day she'd gone again to meet with him. Today was Monday, and the case had not yet been solved.

Sakiko reflected with dismay on what she'd done the night before. Five or six empty pocket flasks of whiskey that the landlord was always drinking and throwing out had been lying on the garbage heap in the backyard. Late last night she'd taken one of those and filled it with the oil used in the oil heater. Ordinarily, if she didn't wear a coat she'd catch cold, but last night she was oblivious to the chill in the outdoor air. As she held the bottle filled with oil in her hand, she felt as if she were clenching burning coals. The throbbing of an ominous drum seemed to be corning from somewhere deep inside her and reverberating infinitely through space. She corked the bottle and placed it in the dark garden. When she took two or three steps backward she could no longer see it. But she was acutely aware of something ghastly, lurking deep in the darkness, like a newborn infant that had just begun to breathe.

She took two or three steps and looked back. "Now there's evidence," she whispered.

For some reason, she'd felt relieved. She had returned to her room and fallen into a sound sleep.

The young couple sitting across from Sakiko must have moved to another table; they had disappeared. Sakiko glanced through the window at the department store entrance. Her date was still waiting there.

Sakiko walked out into the morning air just after seven o' clock, as usual. Today the skies were fair again. The smooth blue sky that stretched overhead was unmarred by a single cloud. The mountains loomed over this side of the street, where the house in which she lived, tile house next door, and the elementary school stood in a row. The grass close to the earth was completely dried out and had turned slightly whitish. That color and the blue sky made a striking contrast.

Everyone was waiting for rain, parched with thirst. It just won't rain, will it? Oh, for a drop of rain! Even though it's this cold, doesn't your throat feel dry? Why is this lasting so long? Strange that a blue sky should seem so ominous. Something's about to happen, there's no doubt about it, it's ready to happen, something...

During this monotonous stretch of fair weather, suddenly an arsonist appears on the scene. She's not a shifty or a vicious type of individual. From a sky so blue that it seems to have been created with undiluted, bright-blue oil paint, a single desire emerges, as if cut out with scissors from that pure blue sky. And that desire begins to pervade the entire world. The culprit steals into the midst of the people who are waiting day after day for a

rainfall. She blends in with those people. At the slightest provocation, she leaps out of their midst and executes the deed. But the culprit is nowhere to be found.

As Sakiko was on her way to work, she saw the investigator walking toward her. She walked straight toward him, smiling thinly. Why bother to use a lie detector? If she were subjected to a lie detector test, she'd surely respond the same way as the criminal, she thought.

She walked alongside her next-door neighbor's hedge. The blue sky was growing brighter by the moment; it was definitely developing into a fine day. Whether the old woman was still snug in her bed or had already gone out somewhere, her house was shrouded in silence and darkness. Sakiko heard an intermittent muffled sound, as if a cough was being stifled, coming from the veranda on the south side of that house. It sounded like the old woman's cough. Suddenly there was a voice.

"I set the fires! I set the fires!"

It was that mynah bird talking. The voice resembled the old woman's, but it was slightly different from the shrill voice in which she chatted with people. It was a mumbling voice, as when she was talking to herself.

Spirited laughter welled up in Sakiko's throat. The distance between her and the investigator was shrinking.

"You're out working bright and early today, too," said Sakiko, deliberately trying to aggravate the man's suspicions about her.

"Keeping tabs on things is my job," he replied, as he approached her.

"Keeping tabs'? Things already seem to be out of your control," said Sakiko, nodding toward the house next door. But the voice was silent. Only a noise that resembled stifled coughing was audible.

"Why is that?" the man asked, coming to an abrupt halt.

Sakiko resisted the urge to reply to that question. She felt like saying, "Because not only I but the old woman next door has begun to go mad."



Works Cited in Footnotes

Bullock, Julia C. *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

Tanaka, Yukiko. *Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Women*. Westport: Praeger, 1995.